



JOHANN STRAUSS

*The* Waltz—that swirling embodiment of vivacious merriment—was once considered a highly questionable, not to say downright, immoral sort of activity. It was, after all, the first dance where the partners embraced each other, and Moralists railed against the abomination of “a lady permitting a man” (other than her husband, presumably) “to encircle her with his arms and press the contour of her waist”. Reformed dancing-masters wrote graphic exposés, forthrightly revealing the ballroom for what it was: “a hotbed of vice within whose treacherous embrace so many sweet young souls have been whirled to perdition”.

With recommendations like that, it was only a matter of time before the waltz became the rage of Europe. Nowhere did it catch on with greater fervor than in the glittering city of Vienna, and there was crowned the first of the Waltz Kings, Johann Strauss the Elder. As properly befitting a royal title, it was passed down from father to son—but not, it must be said, without a terrific battle on the part of the father. Johann Jr. started composing little waltzes when he was six, and already Johann Sr. started getting nervous. Then the boy started to take violin lessons, and Papa Strauss (who could smell a rival, son or no son) proceeded to take more direct action. He alternately wheedled and threatened. He told little Johann all sorts of horrible stories about the struggles musicians had to go through just to make ends meet, and when that didn't work, he took away the lad's fiddle and locked it up in a cupboard. He forbade him to take lessons, and just to make sure, packed him off to a job as a bank clerk.

The results were predictable. The more roadblocks Johann Jr. found in his way, the more he determined to overcome them. He continued to take lessons in secret (from his father's concert-master, if you please), and finally, in October of 1844, when he was only nineteen, he hired an orchestra and let all Vienna know that he, too, was going into the music business.

Papa Strauss was fit to be tied. First he tried to stop the concert, and when he couldn't do that, he sent a whole batch of his friends to boo and hiss, and turn the debut into as big a fiasco as possible. Well, the men started making their rude noises on schedule, but the audience, immediately captivated by the handsome young lad who conducted so dashingly (as was the custom then) with his violin bow, promptly shushed them down. The crowd listened, applauded, and went on to greet the boy's musical magic with cheers, and even tears of joy. "He sprayed sparks as from a galvanic battery", reported one local journalist, noting also that Johann had to

encore almost every piece. Then, just when it seemed that the fever pitch of excitement could rise no higher, Strauss waved his arms for silence, quietly turned to his orchestra, and began conducting "Lorelei Rhine Echoes", his father's most famous waltz. That really did it. The place went wild, and the sentimental Viennese—even including the men who had originally come to ruin the performance—rushed forward, swept Johann up onto their shoulders, and carried him off in triumph, first around the hall, then out into the streets for an impromptu parade of celebration.

From the moment of that glorious debut, Johann Strauss' fame, popularity and success grew by leaps and bounds. With the death of Strauss Sr., in 1849, there was no longer any doubt whatever who wore the Waltz King's crown. Johann merged his own orchestra with his father's old ensemble, and within a few years had built up a tremendous organization, numbering some two hundred copyists, singers, musicians, arrangers, assistant conductors, and even press agents. It got to the point where, on a busy night, Strauss would have three orchestras playing simultaneously at different ballrooms in Vienna, with the Maestro himself merely stopping in to make a brief appearance at each, and perhaps to conduct a number or two personally.

He toured virtually all of Europe, including Russia, and he was even persuaded (by a fee of \$100,000, plus transportation for him, his wife, his two servants and his huge Newfoundland dog) to brave the long ocean voyage and visit America. Always the story was the same—triumph followed triumph, success came after success, until from Moscow to Boston everyone saluted the Waltz King and his scintillating music. In America,

incidentally, it became something of status symbol to acquire a lock of the composer's hair as a souvenir of his presence, and literally thousands of requests poured in. Strauss was flattered, and his servant did a land-office business supplying the demand. The only catch was that instead of genuine Straussian locks, the servant was deftly substituting hair which had been clipped from the abundant coat of the Newfoundland. (Which probably makes Strauss the subject of the first shaggy dog story in musical history, but quite a true one nonetheless.)

Johann Strauss, of course, was far more than a purveyor of dance music. Behind the ingratiating tunes lie inspiration and craftsmanship of the very first rank. His field may have been limited, but within it, he reigned supreme. In a marvelously perceptive article on Strauss (published in the Chicago Tribune in 1925, to mark the composer's centenary), H. L. Mencken summed up his especial contributions: "He took the waltz as his father left it, and gradually built it up into a form almost symphonic. He developed the introduction, which had been little more than an opening fanfare, into a complex and beautiful thing, almost an overture; he elaborated the coda until it began to demand every resource of the composer's art, including even counterpoint. And into the waltz itself he threw such melodic riches, so vast a rhythmic inventiveness and so adept a mastery of instrumentation that the effect was overwhelming. The waltz, as he had brought it up to perfection, became the standard ballroom dance of the civilized world."

In this brilliant phase 4 stereo recording, Antal Dorati leads the London Philharmonic in five of the greatest of the great Strauss waltzes.

THE BLUE DANUBE, amazing as it seems to us today, was a flop the first time around, and was hastily dropped from the repertoire after a repeat performance fared no better than the premiere. There was a good explanation for this phenomenon, however: "The Blue Danube" (as indeed all the other waltzes on this disc except "Voices of Spring") started out as a vocal number for the Men's Choral Society of Vienna, and it came encumbered with hopelessly inane lyrics, some of which even had vague political connotations. ("I'm not so upset about the waltz", Strauss is reported to have told his brother Eduard, after the disastrous premiere, "but the thing had such a nice, elaborate Coda!"). The composer needn't have worried. Shorn of its words, the Blue Danube started its comeback in Paris, and quickly flowed back to Vienna, where it was welcomed home with open arms.

One of the longest of all the Strauss waltzes, TALES FROM THE VIENNA WOODS is also one of the most beautiful. Its extended, pastoral introduction is almost a miniature tone-poem, recalling the piping of shepherds and the chirping of birds in the verdant forests just outside the city. Then a solo zither leads the way to the waltz theme proper, and we are swirled off in an irresistibly joyous chain of dances in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time.

VOICES OF SPRING, as noted above, was not written for the Men's Choral Society, but it too had its vocal part, a rather florid soprano obbligato. Today it is almost always presented in its purely orchestral dress: here, as elsewhere, the warmth and sentiment that Strauss lavished upon his music requires no additional poetic commentary.

Just five days after "The Blue Danube" had proved such a fiasco, Strauss introduced his ARTIST'S LIFE. Fortunately he had learned his lesson, and the waltz appeared without benefit of the choral passages that had originally been affixed to it. The results were far more encouraging—the ardent, impassioned spirit of the music gained it a rousing reception, and its popularity has hardly lessened in the years since.

WINE, WOMEN AND SONG, a properly intoxicating finale to this phase 4 stereo waltz spectacular, was also a hit from the day it was first introduced in 1869. With or without words, Strauss' ebullient music gloriously conjures up the glitter and gaiety of life in the old Austrian capital, and this time the lyrics—while not really contributing to the overall impact—at least didn't interfere with it.

It clearly was no accident that "Vienna Woods", "Blue Danube", "Wine, Women and Song" and so many more of the composer's most evocative pieces, were inspired by the customs, the people and the places in his home town. When notables from every corner of the world gathered to pay their respects to the venerable Waltz King on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his debut (this in 1894, five years before his death), he expressed his thanks in the form of an eloquent toast. "If it be true that I have some talent", said Strauss, "I owe its development to my beloved city. Vienna! I drink to her! May she grow and prosper!"

— ROBERT SHERMAN